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ABSTRACT

While comments in performance evalutions usually focus on competency, potential, and personality characteristics, discussions of personality are particularly vulnerable to sexual stereotyping. To determine whether gender influences the narrative portion of naval officers' evalutions, narrative information was extracted from the comments section of the performance evaluations of 239 line officers (120 women, 199 men). Content analysis indicated that men's evaluations contained significantly more comments, recommendations for future assignments, and recommendations for the position of commanding officer. There was a significant difference by gender in the words used to describe behavior. Male officers were described as competent, logical, dynamic, mature and aggressive on the job, and more effective in training others. Women were more often described as well-groomed, supportive of equal opportunity programs, and an asset to their commands. To examine the practical implications of the language differences in evaluation, two prototype evaluations were created, one typically descriptive of a female officer and the other of a male officer. All references to gender were avoided, and both were equally positive. Mid-level officers (N=67) reviewed the two evaluations. Overwhelmingly, they chose for promotion the officer having the male descriptors. Results suggest that women with begnignly worded evaluations will not reach the upper ranks of the military. (JAC)

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Women Officers' Performance Evaluations: Faint Praise May Affect Promotions

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In the military, as in many large organizations, formal evaluations of job performance strongly influence critical personnel decisions. Officers, in particular, view their performance evaluations as the single most important determinant of the duration of their careers. The armed forces, by law, function under an "up or out" policy, meaning that officers who are not promoted to the next higher rank within a specified period of time are forced into retirement. The primary source of information available to boards that make recommendations for promotion is a complete set of performance evaluations for each eligible officer. These documents are used to provide a history of all assignments held, an indication of level of performance in comparison to others of the same rank, and an estimate of potential. Unfortunately, the information is often inflated as raters attempt to protect the career development of their subordinates. Browning (1978), for example, reported that 90% of all Air Force officers were graded in the highest block in 5 consecutive evaluations. When, as in this case, quantitative material fails to distinguish between good and outstanding candidates, written comments are used to guide decisions.

Comments in performance evaluations usually focus on competency, potential, and personality characteristics displayed on the job. Discussions of personality traits, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual stereotyping by both those writing evaluations and those interpreting them. Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz (1972) found that traits associated with male behavior form a competency cluster, e.g., aggressive, independent, competitive, logical & decisive. Feminine traits, such as tactful, talkative, expressive, and gentle, form a warmth-expressiveness cluster. While both clusters have a positive affect, most employers value competency more than warmth. As a consequence, women who are described as possessing traits consistent with their gender, could find their careers progressing more slowly than a their male peers. Conversely, being described in masculine terms has its attendant risks. Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Maracek and Pascale (1975), in discussing the consequences of incongruent behavior, reported that members of either sex who display cross-sex behavior are viewed as being unlikeable and in poor psychological health.

Nieva and Gutek, in their 1981 review of the literature, cited 24 studies of performance appraisal that investigated gender as an independent variable. Four showed no gender difference, four yielded a pro-female bias, and 16 showed a pro-male bias. Until recently, gender differences in the evaluation of naval officers were of little consequence because separate boards reviewed the records of women and men. In 1981, however, legislation affecting officers in all branches of the armed forces was enacted, requiring the use of a single board to make recommendations for promotions. Thus, women officers, who by law are prohibited from holding many assignments vital to the Navy's mission, now find themselves competing with men for advancement to the next higher rank. They may be doubly disadvantaged if their job performance is evaluated differently from that of men. This possibility has not escaped the attention of the Navy, which has a strong equal opportunity program. Quantitative marks assigned to female and male officers are routinely monitored and do not differ. My research was funded to determine whether gender influences the narrative portion of evaluations.

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Three hypotheses were developed for testing:

(1) There will be no difference in the number or nature of descriptions of job-related skills, professional performance, or recommendations for future assignments of women and men;

(2) While there will be no difference in the number of personality traits described, the traits attributed to women and men will differ;

(3) Leadership skills will be mentioned more frequently in men's narratives and management/administrative skills more frequently in women's narratives.

The sample consisted of 239 unrestricted line officers (120 women, 119 men) who, after 10 years of service, were being considered for promotion to the next higher rank. Narrative information was extracted from the comments section of their most recent performance evaluation and a content analysis was performed, yielding a list of descriptors for each individual. These descriptors were aggregated into major topical areas for some of the analyses. As anticipated, the language in all of the evaluations was very positive.

The results indicate that men's evaluations are a richer source of information than women's. The mode for male officers was 20 unique units of meaningful information versus 15 for women. Significantly more comments appeared in men's evaluations than in women's concerning the impact of their efforts upon the organization and probably behavior under combat conditions. Contrary to expectations, the number of recommendations for future assignments appearing in men's evaluations was more than double that of women's. In addition, only 7% of the women versus 31% of the men were recommended for the position of commanding officer, the most important tour a naval officer can have at this stage of her/his career. The absence of a recommendation communicates a powerful message. To quote from guidance given raters,

> The final paragraph of the evaluation summarizes your recommendations on the officer and what you believe to be his ultimate potential. Promotion potential, command capacity, and future duty recommendations are obligatory unless, as stated previously, you desire a weak or harmful report. (Haering, 1980, p 37)

As hypothesized, there was no difference in the number of descriptors of the manner in which the job was performed or in the number of personality traits discussed. The actual words used to describe behavior, however, showed significant gender differences. Male naval officers were seen as being more competent, logical, dynamic, mature, and aggressive on the job than were female officers. In addition, men, more so than women, were reported to be effective in training others, have the characteristics of a naval officer, be concerned with physical fitness, and have a spouse who supports their careers. Women, more so than men, were described as being well groomed, supportive of equal opportunity programs, and an asset to their commands. Since, as hypothesized, the personality traits differed, discriminate and cluster analyses were performed. Two descriptors discriminated between the sexes at the .01 level-- aggressive and mature. The single-linkage cluster analysis revealed that, with one exception (perceptive), the five traits appearing in the primary male cluster are what Broverman et al called competency descriptors; again, with one exception (displays initiative), the five

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traits in the primary cluster of female officers are thinking/feeling descriptors. The secondary clusters of both genders are cross-sex descriptors.

The third hypothesis stated that leadership skills would be mentioned more frequently in men's evaluations and management/administrative skills would be mentioned more frequently in women's. While the results indicated that the differences were as hypothesized, only comments about leadership yielded a significant z-ratio.

In addition to the analysis of the words appearing in the evaluations, the research was designed to investigate the practical implications of the results if gender differences were found. In other words, do such differences matter in the real world? To answer this question, two prototype evaluations were created, one descriptive of a female officer and the other of a male. An effort was made to replicate the tone, style, and structure of Navy performance evaluations by using typical comments verbatim from actual documents and typing them on an official form. All reference to gender was avoided and both were equally positive. For example, the first two sentences in the man's evaluation were:

> Lt Brown has performed in a superlative manner as Administrative Officer of the Submarine Base. Mature, aggressive, and dynamic, Brown is an extremely forceful officer who carries out duties effectively.

The woman's began:

> Lt Smith's performance has been superlative. As Administrative Officer of the Submarine Base, LT Smith has had to deal with complex civilian and military personnel situations and has done so with the utmost of tact and professionalism.

Sixty-seven mid-level officers, some of whom had sat on past selection boards, were asked to review the two neutered evaluations and recommend only one of the candidates for promotion. Overwhelmingly, they chose the officer having male descriptors. The rationale for making that decision, which they were asked to provide, was revealing. For example, one stated:

> The operative adjectives in LT Brown's comments convey power, ability, forcefulness, and leadership. In addition to getting the job done, he leads, maintains an example (physical fitness).

Twenty officers who were debriefed after participating in the forced-choice senario were genuinely concerned about the outcome. They acknowledged describing the performance of women officers working for them in warmth/expressive terms. Recognizing the strong influence the lack of specific recommendations for the woman had on their decision to promote the man, they began to question what might be said to enhance a woman officer's chances for promotion. Few knew what assignments were open to women who were making a career of the Navy.

This research demonstrated that the job performance of female and male naval officers is evaluated differently. In the context of the military, some of these differences are understandable. Since women

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are not permitted to serve in combat, there is little reason to address their potential performance under combat conditions. Raters may also neglect to discuss their leadership skills if they feel women will not be called upon to be leaders. Other differences are harder to justify. Are women really less competent, logical, and mature yet more valuable to their command than men, as the differences would lead us to conclude? Is their appearance in uniform more impeccable, while they exhibit less pride in the Navy than do men? Does their performance warrant few recommendations and only nebulous praise? Or could it be that seniors put more energy into writing comments that will enhance the careers of their male subordinates than they do for female subordinates? Without malice aforethought, these raters may forget to use the critical phrases in describing women's performance that the military has come to expect in the evaluation of an up-and-coming officer. Without intending harm, they overlook the importance of recommending women for command positions. Instead they resort to a form of praise that, if applied to a male officer, would damn his career to mediocrity. Regardless of intent, the outcome is preordained. Officers described in active, competitive terms are of greater value to the Navy than officers who appear to be lacking these traits. Women, who often don't realize that their benignly worded evaluation is, in fact, harmful will not reach the upper ranks of the military in the numbers their talent and dedication warrant.

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